

Retaining Soldiers in tough times

Editor's Note: We received this article and thought it was very timely and relevant, therefore we are deferring this space to Sgt. Maj. William Sharpsteen.

"I know [patriotism] exists, and I know it has done much in the present contest. But a great and lasting war can never be supported on this principle alone. It must be aided by a prospect of interest, or some reward.

As to pay, Sir, I beg leave to assure the Congress that as no pecuniary consideration could have tempted me to accept this arduous employment at the expense of my domestic ease and happiness, I do not wish to make any profit from it."

(On his appointment as Commander-in-Chief.)

- George Washington

As the above quote illustrates, persuading our great patriots to continue serving our country has been an important focus since the Army's inception in 1775. In all the history since then, the responsibility for preserving America's freedom and protecting our interests around the world has rested, for the most part, upon those who serve in the military forces of our great nation.

"Our Soldiers are our strength" – these words have echoed from the mouths of leaders for decades. But these are tough times: current conflicts and stresses on our force make retaining Soldiers, maintaining that vital strength, a notable challenge.

Now more than ever, we need Soldiers in every component – active, Reserve and National Guard – to enlist and reenlist. Today, again, we are an Army at war, though in our hearts we always hope tomorrow will bring prevalent and lasting peace.

Until we can be sure our interests, citizens and borders are secure, the Army's strength levels must remain steady, and in some instances increased. The Army works assiduously to keep troop strength robust: recruiters roam the United States, searching for citizens willing to serve. Their efforts are aimed at building our future force, by bringing into the Army youthful Soldiers with new ideas. At the other end of the force continuum, Army career counselors work diligently with commanders and leaders at all levels to retain Soldiers and their families within their units and on active duty.

America's Army has evolved significantly since its beginning, but certain constants remain. Today, as in years past, monetary gain is certainly not the main reason why citizens consider careers with the military. But a Soldier's lot has improved considerably: in proof, read Washington's first quote above. Through eight years of leading the Army through the hard-fought war to establish independence, Washington besieged Congress repeatedly, and often unsuccessfully, to provide pay and basic equipment for Soldiers.

Washington himself never accepted pay for those eight years, and many of his Soldiers likewise got little or no compensation for their service. Today a Soldier can rely on building a career that will provide a comfortable and honest, as well as honorable, living. Still, a sense of patriotism and the opportunity to belong to something successful, with a purpose beyond any personal goals, is in many cases what drives us to serve.

The modern Army offers many incentives to Soldiers willing to make a sustained commitment. At reenlistment, Soldiers may

receive bonuses, assignment choices, or for some, a chance to retrain for a new military occupation. There are other, more long-term advantages as well: tax incentives, medical care, and a retirement pension at the close of a successful career.

Beyond these incentives, however, is another very simple but profound consideration.

Many Soldiers, and many of the best Soldiers, simply bask in the satisfaction that comes from meeting the personal challenges of training hard, aiding others in need, fighting for the common good and protecting our nation. Along with those challenges come the benefits of comradeship, travel to foreign countries, and the chance to do extraordinary things they'd never experience outside of the military.

Washington's Soldiers laid the foundation for the Army we know today, and in his concern for them, he set the standard for Army leaders. At every level of the Army, by the sheer virtue of their leadership, our officers and noncommissioned officers have a tremendous influence on Soldier decisions to remain on active duty.

A passing pat on the back by a platoon leader for a job well done can motivate a Soldier and fulfill a sometimes crucial need to feel appreciated. Train Soldiers hard to be experts in their occupations, and they will know their leaders understand the importance of what they do for the team.

Give any Soldier, and his or her family, as much predictability as possible — allow them to plan for their free time and their futures — and your investment as a leader will pay great dividends not only at reenlistment time, but in the form of a strong, confident, well-trained force. In the final analysis, caring leadership leads to successful careers for Soldiers.

In my tenure with the U.S. Army Europe, I have seen sustained success in retaining great Soldiers and their families. Obviously, there are many benefits for Soldiers assigned to overseas commands, but the leaders of USAREUR provide much more. There is a strong sense of unity among the troops, and they have a confidence in their families' well-being that can only come from strong, caring leadership. As professional Soldiers, we in USAREUR know the mission comes first, but our personal and family needs hold high importance in the overall mix when missions are considered.

If I could make one recommendation designed to strengthen and sustain our Army, it would be directed to the leaders of our great Soldiers. I would suggest that leaders at all levels take the time to talk to Soldiers about their careers, families, promotion potential, place within the unit, and personal impact on the Army.

I would call upon leaders to give Soldiers that pat on the back, the "always important reinforcement." I would ask Soldiers, who are serving honorably, to reenlist and stay with our team.

Leaders: you will never know how you might influence the strength of our active-duty and Reserve Army, and our Army National Guard, unless you ask. Ask your Soldiers to stay with the team. Tomorrow's Army depends upon the role we take in retaining Soldiers today.

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